

Exploring Configurations of Leadership in Urban Governance Settings

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Introduction

The leadership challenge in collaborative forms of governance such as quasi – markets, partnerships and networks, is to provide leadership without governing either too little or too much. Unlike competitive markets, collaborative forms of governance must be convened, facilitated and given a direction. Unlike hierarchical forms of government, collaborative governance cannot be governed by one – directional command and control. If collaborative governance offers the context for policy – making nowadays, then there seems to be a need to reconsider concepts of leadership and especially the role of political leaders. This is, in a nutshell, the message from the ‘collaborative governance scholars – family’ for our political leaders. Not easy, so it seems: ‘leadership without governing too little or too much’. No consultant should try to be paid for this type of advice.

The concept of meta – governance has especially become popular and is presented as useful for a better understanding of the roles of politicians: meta – governance is, in its purest theoretical interpretation, about regulation of self – regulating networks, regulating at a distance without intervening in the network activities itself (Kooiman 1993; Jessop 1998 en 2011, Sørensen en Torfing 2009). But the concept of ‘meta – governance’ itself has been stretched: it is not only about ‘hands off’ designing and framing (regulation of regulating), but also about ‘hands on’ referring to management in networks and being a political actor in the network (Sørensen en Torfing, 2009) so it is also about playing an active role in the regulating arrangement that brings together public and private actors. The combination of ‘meta’ – governance and ‘hands on’ management raises however new questions about the conceptual validity of ‘meta – governance’. If ‘meta – governance’ covers all possible roles, what is then the added value of the concept?

Public management researchers as Osborne, Agranoff and Milward, amongst others, introduced terms such as New Public Governance, Collaborative Management and Network Management: those terms, especially by using pro – actively the buzzword ‘New’ and the concept management itself, suggests that the nature of public leadership is changing in a structural manner. New patterns and new forms of leadership emerge, so the idea seems to be and the managers are coming in more actively than before. Anyhow, the message is clear: if collaborative networks dominate the scenes of actual policy – making, than politicians should change their daily behavior and practices. Traditional politics is over, enters new politics.

Studies of the meaning and form of political leadership in collaborative forms of governance are however few and far between. One reason for the limited number might be that the focus of most network research has been on public administrators as the main managers while, often more implicitly than explicitly, the basic assumption is that politicians stay at a distance of those collaborative settings. There seems to be an implicit assumption about the distant roles of politicians, thereby sometimes mixing the expected roles with the actual ones.

Reading the existing literature (part one) makes us leaving the table with a hungry feeling. Our intuition leading to this paper tells us that this approach is not suited to understand what politicians in the Belgian system really do. They certainly have no time to read scientific papers on meta – governance and their behavior doesn't correspond to the expected one. If we want to understand the drive and motives of politicians in network-like settings, we need a more elaborated approach, starting bottom – up, from a better understanding of what goes on in those settings. The paper uses empirical material of studies in our institution to develop a framework (from part two onwards) that helps us to understand better and more profoundly the roles of politicians in the Belgian network cases. The paper has only modest theoretical ambitions: if we want to know more about the role of Flemish / Belgian politicians in network settings, how could the existing literature be enriched, what do we miss and how could filling up these missing links leads us to a better adapted framework for analysis?

1. Exploring the meta-governance literature

What explains the absence of the focus on role and behavior of politicians in a lot of network literature? Is it the split between administrative sciences and political sciences in universities and countries? Is it linked to the political culture in some Anglo – Saxon countries that could explain why the focus is mostly on managers and public administrators? Is it probably because it is so difficult to interview politicians and engage them actively in research? Whatever the reasons are, it is astonishing that we know so little about the roles of the most important player in policymaking. A lot of studies on local government, the focus in our paper, keep the concept government on an abstract level of analysis, without detailed focus on the interactions within the black box of government. Especially from a Belgian viewpoint it is interesting to observe that politicians, when studied in network literature, often are described as isolated persons, working in the realm of politics detached from the network world, while most politicians in the Belgian system have close links and are intensively interwoven with the non – profit and civil society organisations. No politician in our system is only 'a politician'.

Whatever the explanation is, a quick scan of the literature leads us to a rather disappointing conclusion: much has been written on the roles politicians should develop towards the emerging collaborative settings but much less has been written on the roles politicians actual develop in those already existing settings. The most recent literature is mostly dominated by the concept of meta – governance, developed by scholars as Kooiman, Jessop and Sørensen and Torfing. As we already stated above, the concept itself opens a new discussion: the hands-off categories design and framing come close to the meta – roles *senso strictu*. But the hands on forms of meta – governance contain management of the networks by politicians and the participation of them in the network. Being actor in the network comes closer to the Belgian practices, because the patterns of decision making in Belgium have been dominated traditionally by the political parties with the executive politicians as the spider in the web. One could call this politely 'management and participation in networks' but political scientists

would probably use other concepts: power, clientelism, corporatism,... It is rather naïve to think that a presumed new setting of collaborative governance would change in itself this inherited structural patterns of power. The question is how those power balances are influenced by changing settings or how existing power relations adapt themselves to the changing circumstances of policy making. Power, it should be mentioned, is absent in most of those studies. It seems as if politicians are detached from their core business: power. But networks are about power and if power is the heart of the network, then politicians, at least in the Belgian setting, are not only interested in networks but they develop networks themselves, they develop strategies in networks or use networks for their strategy. And maybe the central actors in the network not only accept but maybe also expect those roles; maybe they use politics and politicians for their and for the network goals.

Analyzing the meta-governance literature shows two lines of research. First, there is the more prescriptive literature, prescribing how politicians should act and behave in relation to collaborative settings. In this type of literature the main topic is the democratic value and control in and of those settings. This seems to be the most important role of politicians: playing the role of democratic interface between the public, parliaments and the collaborative settings. Their role is mainly observed as the external linkage, from the network to the public and the parliaments. “Elected politicians can lend democratic legitimacy to governance networks in so far as they are capable of controlling the formation, functioning and development of governance networks. The governance network literature has aimed to redefine political control in terms of what they tend to call ‘metagovernance’” (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005: 202). Hansen (2005: 224) points to the role of politicians as ‘guardians of democracy’ who watch over democratic values in networks.

Sørensen and Torfing make a distinction between A – politicians and B – politicians. The A team consists of politicians who, influenced by the New Public Management discourse, think and act strategically in order to develop the public sector as a whole, choose the right mechanisms of governance, and maximize outputs and outcomes. The B team consists of politicians who in a more narrow-minded way are engaged in interest-based single-issue politics. The meta-governance of elected politicians is most often conducted by politicians from the A team (Sørensen and Torfing 2005: 205) The B’s are thus not capable to play in the A – champions league of the real meta – governors. The B’s are of the traditional type. They have a hard time to let go of the hierarchical, command-and-control mechanisms of policymaking and implementation. “These politicians will tend to see governance networks as messy, undemocratic and a threat to their political authority. Consequently, they will oppose the devolution of power to governance networks and refuse to act as metagovernors. In the last decade, however, the NPM doctrine has managed to redefine the traditional self-image of elected politicians by portraying them as ‘managing directors’ in charge of formulating the strategic objectives of public policy” (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009: 254). Further on we will demonstrate with one case analysis that politicians doesn’t consider networks as messy and as a threat to their authority, it is the other way round, at least in our cases: politicians create and use what others would call messy networks to develop, strengthen and confirm their authority. And it is not at all about the B – category but we see that the leading politicians take the lead of the networks, in the urban settings in which our cases develop.

Throughout all those literature, the main idea remains that, if network participation is at stake, the role of politicians then should be rather restricted. They should take their distance and the execution of active roles is also based on a kind of ‘meta-governance’ at the operational level:

should I do this; is it useful to introduce new actors; how could I improve the network without intervening directly? The same line of thinking is present in the literature on interactive policy making, mostly dominated by Dutch scholars. Also here the ‘meta – governance’ attitude should dominate the strategy of the politicians. Politicians always are supposed to act on behalf of the network and not on their own behalf. Also here our experience opens up the discussion: if politicians create and use networks for their own strategy and if this gives legitimacy to the networks, on whose behalf is the network acting then? What happens when the ‘behalf’s’ at stake in the network coincide?

The more empirical strand of literature reveals that politicians face a number of obstacles when trying to conduct a meta-governance role. We uncover at least four impediments.

First, the active role of elected politicians as network designers is often prevented by the fact that this task is regarded as belonging to public administrators and thus the process of setting the stage for the network is dominated by top administrative leaders (for example chief executive officers). “Another problem is that in many cases the politicians from the A team leave the lion’s share of meta-governance to public administrators who function as liaison officers between the elected government and the self-regulating governance networks” (Sørensen and Torfing 2005: 205). “When the framework is not set by local government itself, and where the aim is more deliberative than substantial, the political system tends to be more distanced, and high ranking administrative officers have a stronger role in the process of policy and resource framing” (Haveri et.al. 2009: 549).

Politicians are also marginalized by the professional managers of networks in the daily processes of the network activities. “On the one hand, representatives of local governments are seen to have difficulties in advancing the policies of their own organisation in multi-level and multi-actor decision making contexts, which are often dominated by full-time working professionals and experts. On the other hand, collaborative bodies mainly consist of experts and administrators rather than politicians ... It is easy to understand why politicians are often in a weaker position in relation to the governance of collaboration than the municipal manager and other leading officials. They lack the skills as well as the time to use the tools that are considered to be most efficient” (Haveri et.al. 2009: 551).

Politicians lack the necessary competences and those competences come closer to the profile of the public administrators. “To perform these important tasks, public metagovernors must possess a range of strategic and collaborative competences. The strategic competences include negotiated goal alignment, risk assessment, procedural flexibility, project management, and the ability to tackle unconventional problems. The collaborative competences include communication skills, storytelling capacities and talents for coaching, cooperation and trust building. The lists of strategic and collaborative competences can be further expanded, and some of the competences are also relevant for carrying out tasks other than those narrowly related to networks. However, the important thing to realize is that the metagovernance of governance networks brings some particular strategic and collaborative competences to the fore” (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009: 254).

Second: politicians’ active participation in governance networks is often constrained by the New Public Management discourse that aims to establish a rigid and impenetrable boundary between ‘steering’ and ‘rowing’ or, in other words, between the formulation of the overall policy objectives, which is the task of politicians, and the art of government through interaction with relevant stakeholders, which is the task of public administrators. The

generally have problems to formulate a long term strategy and they “*have become isolated at the top of the pyramid and lack detailed knowledge about the problems, challenges and policy options within the different policy areas. This makes it difficult for them to formulate the overall framework for more detailed network-based policy decisions. In short, politicians cannot do the ‘steering’ if they are not part of the ‘rowing’, but that conflicts then with the dominant NPM – paradigm*” (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005a: 215). The instituted governance model of central goal-steering by the entire council and decentral self- and user-governance by the institutions had left the elected politicians in what many perceived to be an ‘empty-handed’ position – ‘far away from things’ – and without any grasp of what was going on in the municipality. (230) ... but it is hardly to be conceived of as a new role, detachable from ‘ordinary’ participation as co-governors in governance networks. To be guardians of democracy, elected politicians must be involved and partake in ‘everyday’ and substantive ‘first-order’ policy making – in co-governance with other participating and co-governing actors. (Hansen, 2005: 224).

These quotations reveal an interesting tension: NPM asks for distance and a meta or hands off position, while good policy decisions asks for direct information, engagement in the daily and more operational routines of the networks, the hands on modus. The reference to NPM raises more questions: as we know from comparative research the NPM practices differ from system to system. Belgium is part of what Pollitt and Bouckaert call the ‘neo-Weberian’ countries, in which practices of NPM are combined with routines of the old school bureaucracy, including the leading role of politicians (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). But is NPM useful to understand the dynamics in policy networks, the networks at stake when meta – governance is mentioned. It seems to us that NPM is mainly or even only useful for service delivery networks described, amongst others, by Provan and Milward. How can NPM be a guiding principle in complex policy networks dealing with wicked problems and for deliberative settings? As we shall see in the Belgian case, NPM is totally useless to understand how politicians behave in complex policy networks and the hypothesis of a distant position, doesn’t help us at all. Instead: for service delivery networks, more appropriate for NPM – frameworks, the analysis seems to be correct, at least for certain types but even then not for all of them.

We see the literature struggling with this tension: “rather than some new role of meta-governance ‘from above’, the main lesson seems to be that elected politicians must be present, take part and engage actively in processes and arenas of policy making with the variously affected actors. Such presence and active participation is required in order for the politicians to: give attention and direction to the policy-making process – without dictating; listen to and learn from the affected actors – without being bound; make their concerns known – arguing and giving reasons in policy makers; make the affected actors assume and share responsibility as partaking front of the affected; ensure openness and publicity in the policy-making process” (Hansen, 2005: 235).

Finally, literature suggests a real role crisis, partly because politicians seem to be incapable to adopt a meta – role (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005b). Other studies show the politicians struggling with the expected role profiles: “most municipal politicians in varying degrees tend to see themselves as metagovernors and not as sovereign politicians. For many of them, this role perception seems to be a natural conclusion to their very low expectations regarding the degree to which it is possible to govern society. One of them argues, “It is a very complex society we have, even though it is well organized. We are placed in the center of a chaos and seek to create some order.” (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005b: 107) Others express some degree of criticism towards the metagoverning role of politicians. A number of politicians feel that the new role has disempowered them (Sørensen and Torfing, 2005b: 110). This suggests

strongly that networks took over the political scene and that politicians are left behind driven to despair and into a real existential role crisis.

2. A framework for analysis

The empirical basis for all those important and far reaching conclusions often seems to be weak. It is not always as clear as it should be where description starts and where assumptions and normative criteria take over the research. But maybe it is possible that those conclusions fit into the political systems under study. Anyhow: from a Belgian perspective, a lot of questions raise and we feel uncomfortable with many of these intermediate conclusions. Is there really a role crisis; are public administrators taking over the networks; do politicians miss the competences to deal with networks on a strategic and at the operational level of network activities? Do politicians and networks function in separate worlds and are networks taking over traditional politics? Are networks new and is the role of politicians changing?

What we try to do in this paper is to develop an approach in two steps that is useful for us to understand what Belgian / Flemish politicians at the local government level do:

- (1) We use a more elaborated set of variables in order to understand the context in which local politicians operate. The meaning of local politics differs from setting to setting. We discern in this chapter five types of local networks, one of which are local policy networks;
- (2) We think that the study of roles of politicians in local policy networks needs a thick description based on a detailed reconstructed analysis of policy making. Instead of using types of roles at a general level, we need to describe what politicians really do and why they act as they do. We use here the conclusions of two of our own PhD's, focusing on political leadership in the collaborative settings of local policy networks (chapter 3).

We take the helicopter to have an overview of network settings in which local politicians are engaged, in very different ways. We use the findings here of several empirical studies we carried out in different regions in Flanders (Decorte and De Rynck 2010; De Rynck, 2011). The methodology of our studies has been used later on to make an inventory and evaluation of all types of local networks in which Flemish local governments are engaged (Agentschap voor Binnenlands Bestuur, 2012). We discern five clusters of local networks that could be considered as configurations in which local politicians operate:

(1) Centrally designed local networks

A lot of local service delivery networks in Belgium are designed and framed by the central government, mainly the Flemish government. At first sight one could state that those central politicians play the role of designer and framer but both concepts are not useful for this type of networks: one uniform top – down regulation is made for all local networks in the Flemish region, whatever their differences and differentiated dynamics are. This is contradictory to what is meant by design and framing in the meta – governance literature, focussing on tailor – made interventions for one specific network in one specific context. Public administrators at the central level of regional government of Flanders do the follow-up of those local networks and are the first and often also the last relay for those networks. In most cases those networks are created by imposing a uniform network structure, aimed at service delivery, mainly in the sphere of welfare politics. In

those centrally designed local networks, local politicians usually doesn't play any role at all, except in some cases the marginal role of observator and follower if some of their own public services are part of the network. So, the conclusion here is simple: local politicians do not play any important governance – role in centrally designed local service delivery networks.

(2) Traditional local service delivery networks, locally designed

In some locally designed service delivery networks, local politicians play an important role as network broker in a duo – role with the managers of the networks. We see these patterns primarily in traditional networks in the sphere of health care, where politicians in the Flemish tradition are closely related to private non – profit actors, who are mainly subsidised by the central government. For this type of networks, the personal interactions between politicians and non – profit organisations, stemming from the same (catholic, socialist, liberal) policy family are the main regulating mechanisms. In that type of corporatist or closed networks local politicians often are the linking pin between both spheres in society. That means that politicians in those networks not only play their formal and institutional roles, but that they often play brokerage roles. That makes them maybe even indispensable for the effectiveness of the network. The conclusion here is that local politicians in those networks act as brokers between public and private actors.

(3) New local service delivery networks, locally designed

At the local level, new types of local services developed in the last two decades, in policy arrangements of a new type especially compared to the traditional closed and corporatist ones of type 2. In those relatively new and more open pluralistic local service delivery networks, for instance in the field of child care, youth policy, sports, culture and social economy, local politicians often (not always) play the role of strategic manager, supported by the operational management executed by the managers of the networks. Most Flemish politicians seem not to be hindered by the philosophy of the New Public Management for this type of service delivery activities and they combine steering, rowing with sometimes even the very operational daily management of the network. Also in those cases, as in the complex policy networks we describe later, the politician gives legitimacy to the service delivery. If the politician pays attention to the network and is active personally in the network, organisations will mandate their strongest representatives, thereby strengthening the effectiveness of the networks.

(4) Policy networks at regional level, centrally designed

For some topics policy networks are created by uniform central design at the regional level, on a scale where a group of local governments is involved. In those networks representatives of the local government do exactly what representing means: they represent the interests of their local government and lobbying is the most important activity, including lobbying central government for local interests, thereby using and playing in and outside the network within the political party lines between the local and central level (Voets, 2008).

Some of those regional and centrally designed networks are of the traditional corporatist type, mainly in the domain of labour policy and economic development. These spheres or domains have been traditionally dominated by the iron triangles of government, trade unions and representatives of the enterprise world. Local politicians are part of those networks in which the role of local government is rather marginal. In some cases local politicians with the statute of important mayors use those regional networks as useful

platforms for their goals and projects, but in most cases local politicians are mainly observers and only by exception they develop some network activities in this type of local network.

(5) Local policy networks, locally designed

Finally, the fifth type of local networks, is the ‘real thing’: the collaborative policy networks dealing with and constructed for wicked problems in which several public and private networks bargain. This is the type of network we are now focussing on, using case studies in two Flemish cities. This is the type of network we need thick description for. Analysis of the roles of politicians should be based on a thorough description of the policy making process in and through the network. We present the results of this research in the following chapter.

Those five network settings show how different the position and roles of local politicians in local networks are. It should be possible to elaborate the five settings further in a more detailed analysis of these specific configurations. But for policy networks we need analysis of the process of policy making in the network: it is the only possible way to discover what politicians do.

3. Thick description: analysing the process of policy making in networks

The process of policy making in networks should be, more than it is nowadays in the literature, the starting point of analysis. Instead of starting from a preconfigured set of roles at a general level of description and in a rather static application, we need a more process oriented and dynamic approach.

The PhD of Thomas Block (2009) describes how entrepreneurial leaders are involved in urban development projects (UDP’s) in Kortrijk (75.000 inhabitants), how they use their power resources and what impact they have in those collaborative networks. The PhD of Karolien Dezeure (2012) compares the policy making in two urban development projects in Ghent (250.000 inhabitants) and focuses especially on the interaction between politicians, public administrators and civil society. In both PhD’s the policy making process has been reconstructed by in - depth analysis of documents and long and open interviews with all the key players.

3.1 Kortrijk: the mayor as policy entrepreneur, creating collaborative settings

Since 2011, the urban and architectural metamorphose of Kortrijk is visible for inhabitants and visitors. The amount of building excavations and traffic diversions is drastically diminished, the perception of livability has increased and innovative design lures specific tourists to the heart of the city (City Monitor, December 2011). The three UDPs resulted not only in a real metamorphose of the physical space in the heart of the city, but also established a new strategic (dis)course for the commercial area, for culture and creation, and for innovation and the creative economy. The completion of the three UDP’s described here is certainly a feature of this.

(1) ‘K in Kortrijk’, the Foruminvest shopping complex. In the shopping area in the city centre of Kortrijk a large shopping centre with 85 shops, a designer high-rise block containing approximately 80 housing units and a large car park was built. The project was constructed

and finished in 2010 on a neglected site that was once home to a primary and secondary school. Foruminvest, a Dutch investment company, which has completed dozens of similar projects in a number of European countries, funded and developed the entire project. This investor and the Stadsontwikkelingsbedrijf Kortrijk (SOK), an autonomous municipal company, have opted here for a public-private partnership. Foruminvest invested EUR 160 million in the shopping centre, including a high-rise block of flats. This is at once the biggest private investment ever made in the city centre of Kortrijk. Moreover, the project is generating new initiatives such as the foundation of a Business Improvement District and a Building Fund.

(2) *The Leie Improvement Project.* In a nutshell this urban project involves straightening, deepening and broadening the river Leie in the centre of the city of Kortrijk to allow ships of up to 1,350 tonnes to pass. This fits in with a European decision supported by the Belgian state and incumbent on the city of Kortrijk. These works have huge urban development repercussions for the city: the demolition of 5 bridges, the construction of 7 new bridges, the laying of boulevards, parks, a skatebowl, etc. The supralocal government considered these public works more as large-scale infrastructural works dictated by technical standards. In the beginning the city did not support the works. Influenced by various actors and processes the city of Kortrijk has gradually begun - especially in the 1990s and in leaps thereafter - to see the Leie Improvement Project more as a lever for high quality urban spaces. In the end the city embraced the project with open arms to give the public areas in the city greater architectural allure and make them more attractive. Top architects with international reputations were attracted to design the new bridges, quays and parks. The majority of the politicians, civil servants and external parties who were interviewed in the context of this study described the Leie Improvement Project as the most radical public works in the city since many decades.

(3) *Buda-island = Arts island.* The city of Kortrijk aims to develop Buda-island, located between the arms of the Old and the New Leie, into a sort of artists' retreat. Although until now it has been difficult to overlook the health care industry's expansion on the island (e.g. rest home, service flats, crèche, etc.), an attempt is being made to use Buda-island to place the city of Kortrijk on the (international) map in terms of culture creation and artistic development. Cultural organisations are being given infrastructure, specialised post-training courses are developed, design projects and innovative economy are getting support, etc. It is essential that all this goes hand in hand with a physical-spatial element. In the spatial development project the Buda-island is incorporated in the morphological carriers of the city (i.e. river Leie and North-South axis) and much emphasis is placed on the creation of public areas and green areas.

During the interviews it became clear that the shift in mayor in 2001 had a huge impact on the city of Kortrijk, the urban policy and the decision-making processes in the three UDP's. In general, a more urban mentality, a focus on innovation, creation and design, and mayoral entrepreneurialism were brought in at the cost of social concerns and a traditional government approach. Between 2001 and 2008 Stefaan De Clerck was mayor of Kortrijk. Before that period he held the position of federal Minister of Justice (1995-1998) and that of national chairman of the Christian democratic party (1999-2003). So he combined during a few years two strenuous posts, created a large network at several policy levels, and succeeded in translating his political celebrity in many votes at (local) elections. Mayor De Clerck's personal interests are located in the fields of arts, design, culture and architecture, so it seems self-evident that he was also attracted to UDPs that had the potential to compete with flagship projects in an intercity competition on creativity and innovative economy. While his predecessors did not seem interested in urban transformations and let themselves be guided

along in smaller projects, mayor De Clerck strived for innovation and a real physical urban transformation of his city. For other local politicians and civil servants the mayor has the reputation of a 'presidential' leader. During the interviews it became clear that his leadership style was largely an effect of his ministerial experience. De Clerck was also characterized as energetic but chaotic: *"he seems an unguided missile [...] doing a lot of things without formal support and strategic plans"*. The latter was not always perceived as negative because the interviewees became more and more witness of urban transformations. As expected, we may conclude that private actors, semi-public actors and/or supra-local public actors significantly influence UDPs that are carried out in the city centre of Kortrijk. In this analysis we will focus on the dominant role and the strategic behaviour of mayor De Clerck.

(1) 'K in Kortrijk': radical policy change and the autonomous municipal company as vehicle

In a first case we analyse the transformational project for Kortrijk's shopping area. Which problems did we find in the policy stream? This city had lived for far too long on former commercial success stories (e.g. the first car free pedestrian streets of Flanders in the sixties) and had not sufficiently invested in this important part of the city, while nearby cities had increasingly entered into competition to attract shoppers. As a result, chain stores had left the city centre and other urban deprivation problems had occurred (e.g. a primary school became vacant). Small interventions in the commercial area had not been able to turn the tide (i.e. failure of alternate policy). The 2000 local elections (political stream) brought a new local political leader to power: Stefaan De Clerck. Remarkably, neither in the coalition agreement, nor in other policy documents of that period, we noticed that a transformation of the shopping area was expected or was a priority.

In 2001 the new mayor De Clerck became president of the SOK, an urban autonomous municipal company established by means of Flemish initiatives. Immediately the SOK bought the vacant primary school and noticed that – due to a reorganisation – also the secondary school wanted to withdraw from the heart of the city. These problems led to a policy window. In 2003 and after a preparatory study, the mayor asked the SOK to launch a call addressed to private investment companies. Three candidates submitted a proposal that was in line with the call, namely limited and acupunctural interventions. But within the soup of ideas (policy streams), the fourth candidate, the Dutch private investment company Foruminvest suggested a drastic UDP, a transformation of the whole shopping area, and a change of (dis)course. They immediately got support from the mayor, who – as chairman and composer of the urban design competition jury – grasped the policy window and gave a green light to Foruminvest. Our research results show a strong influence from the investment company within the decision-making process concerning the shopping centre 'K in Kortrijk'. Representatives of Foruminvest were heavily involved not only in the idea of the urban project but also in working out the details and the execution thereof.

De Clerck defended the new transformative strategy within his informal political networks, decided to sell the grounds of both schools to enlarge the urban project site, and also insisted to cooperate with top architects. The latter fits with his ambition and personal interest to increase the architectural quality of the city. In 2004 the first formal agreement between all involved partners was signed. Under supervision of the mayor, the SOK held the pen and defined the preconditions. In 2005, all actors approved a more elaborated and refined agreement. This agreement also mentioned the establishing of a Business Improvement District around 'K in Kortrijk'. De Clerck picked up this idea from foreign cases (e.g. US and Germany).

Due to the 2005 formal agreement, the ideas and plans for the shopping complex got a more public character. The engagements and agreements of all involved partners not only influenced (even pushed away) plans of other local politicians and city departments (e.g. mobility and housing), but opened a strained debate on the scale of the project. Local politicians and civil servants evaluated a large shopping complex in the heart of the city as exaggerated. During the interviews these actors made clear that this transformative UDP would have been rejected if they and other stakeholders (e.g. neighbourhood organisations and the public transport company) had been involved from the beginning. However, it was exactly because the mayor did not use the municipal executive (College of Mayor and Aldermen) nor the city council, but rather the SOK as the vehicle to carry out the delicate negotiations with Foruminvest, that this UDP made progress in a rather smooth and fast way.

After the 2006 local elections De Clerck stayed as mayor, although his Christian Democratic Party lost the absolute majority. De Clerck formed a coalition with the Liberal Democrats, not only because they had lower demands and claims than the Socialist Party, but also because of the contested 'neo-liberal' shopping complex. Representatives of the Liberal Democrat Party supported his 'creative city' discourse and could give a helping hand to the implementation of this UDP on several occasions (e.g. in 2007, concerning the building permit). In the coalition agreement of both parties, the overall idea, the creation of a Business Improvement District, a design platform and a Building Fund with relation to 'K in Kortrijk' were mentioned. The latter are new ways to control and renovate the area around the shopping complex. The private investment company, but also the SOK (including De Clerck), seemed in favour of a gentrification process. The construction works started in 2007 and the doors of the shopping complex opened in 2010.

(2) Leie Improvement Project: political localism and the intermunicipal cooperation as vehicle

As mentioned above, it was around 1992 that the city of Kortrijk finally saw the added value of an important European waterway project to connect and deepen certain rivers and canals between Paris and Antwerp. But the implementation of several successive plans, protocols and agreements was far from successful (Block et al, 2012). The reasons for the delay were multi-faceted: bureaucratic discussions, political games and strategies, discovery of an old belt, national elections, etc. The number of actors involved in this case is relatively high, not in the least because of the divided character of the Flemish Government who is founder and prime contractor in the case of Leie Improvement Project. Ministers, cabinet members and representatives of AWZ/W&Z (Waterways and Marine Affairs Administration/Waterways and Sea Channels n.v) provided financial means and a wide variety of master plans. Also the role of a few employees of the intermunicipal cooperation Leiedal (IMC Leiedal) is quite crucial here. The vision, the innovative suggestions and the professional knowledge of this intermediary organisation provided a strong sense of direction to this project. More than the SOK (cf. case 'K in Kortrijk'), the employees of IMC Leiedal made their own contribution.

The relevant point in this case is the way mayor De Clerck dealt with supra local governments and IMC Leiedal. At the end of 2000 Stefaan De Clerck became mayor and embraced the unique opportunity ('policy window') immediately to transform the architectural and urban design of Kortrijk. To make sure that the supra-local streams of financial resources ran to his city, he decided to appoint an alderman from the Socialist Party, even though his Christian Democratic Party had obtained an absolute majority. But with this appointment within the

political stream, he created a direct line with the relevant Minister in this regard, Steve Stevaert (Socialist Party). As a result, we can find in the local coalition agreement of 2000 a quite new discourse and a real plea for a high-quality completion of the Leie Improvement Project. Although the negotiations between all actors involved were attended with give-and-take arrangements, the atmosphere between mayor De Clerck and Minister Stevaert was good and useful. The political choice for a Socialist Alderman brought grist to the mill of Kortrijk. As a famous supra-local politician, mayor De Clerck could also count on support of some other politicians. He linked this project also to new plans for Buda Islands (see further) and puts his stamp with design bridges, parks and boulevards. In new plans and protocols, we noticed that the impact of the mayor (officially 'the city council') increased. In March 2003 Minister Stevaert became national chairman of the Socialist party. Gilbert Bossuyt, Socialist mayor of the neighboring municipality Menen, succeeded Stevaert as relevant Minister. He had 'other priorities' with the limited budget (policy and problem stream) and the Leie Improvement Project had to deal with a delay. Due to the 2004 national elections (political stream), a Christian Democratic Minister became responsible and mayor De Clerck brokered immediately the full funding of the Leie Improvement Project. The new Minister said to believe in the vision and UDPs of Kortrijk, and promised full support in (again) new pacts and protocols.

Besides his supra-local (political) network, mayor De Clerck steered this project by his professional and personal relationships within IMC Leiedal. Since 2000, this intermunicipal cooperation was appointed to follow up this UDP for the city of Kortrijk. In reality, they did their job in extensive consultation with the mayor. In formal and informal meetings the mayor always took the lead. As a consequence, representatives and members of the local government and civil servants of the city only played a minor role in the decision-making process. Most of the key figures we interviewed during our research stated honestly that they did not know who decided what during this transformative project. The only exception is Kortrijk's head engineer who gave technical advice to the mayor.

(3) Buda Island: coupling (against the) streams

Before 2000, the cultural policy in Kortrijk was focused on community development and 'low culture'. Interested in 'high culture', modern art, design and architecture, Stefaan De Clerck, as a new mayor, opted for another policy line. Puzzling with an old brewery on the island that earlier had been turned into exercise rooms (for theatre, art and music), an empty and vacant cinema, the literature of Richard Florida and Charles Landry, the Leie Improvement Project (see above), urban plans of architect Secchi, wishes of the professional art organisations etc., mayor De Clerck interwove all those elements from the problem and policy streams, introduced and promoted the idea of 'Buda island = Art Island', and launched a new discourse and slogan for his city: 'Kortrijk, city of innovation, creation and design'. All interviewees were unanimous: *"the Buda Island project is almost a pure De Clerck project"*.

To get the idea sharp and to convince other stakeholders, De Clerck selected in 2002 three professors to write 'pro domo' academic reports that confirmed or supported his urban/policy project: no small-scale initiatives on Buda Island but the physical spatial development of an arts island as a centre for contemporary art creations to function as a catalyst to give Kortrijk a strong position in an inter-city competition. Via informal political relations and rare formal meetings, this new idea slowly found its way into the city council. Most local politicians and civil servants considered the whole concept as an elite project and a too expensive

engagement. The support was very limited, the irritability high. However, De Clerck had the support of the Director of IMC Leiedal and some other local key figures.

Although the discussion was still going on, De Clerck grasped another ‘policy window’ and succeeded in submitting a formal application for a UDP, funded by the Flemish Urban Policy. Particularly important here was a crucial intervention by the former Alderman for town planning and urban development. By pursuing spatial interventions on the degenerating urban island, he was able to get the support of the rank and file of the Christian Democrat Party. Due to the approval of a € 3.000.000 fund of the Flemish government, this UDP reached in 2003 a point of no return. The institutional arrangement that mayor De Clerck installed to control the implementation was not a not-for-profit organization, and as such, it differed from the suggestion in a specific juridical report. De Clerck became chairman of a new autonomous municipal company, ‘Buda AGB’. Since then and till now (2013) a lot of projects have been realised and the concept of ‘the Buda Island’ has become visible.

3.2 Ghent: executive politicians as the spider in the webs

The case analysis in Ghent deals with two UDP’s: the Brugse Poort and Ledeberg. Both areas have similar characteristics: most of the housing has been built in the period of the industrial revolution and there is a massive housing problem, both on the level of housing quality as there is an urgent need for more social housing, mixed up with unemployment, poverty and problems of integration and livability. With the financial help of the Flemish government, both UDP’s were set up by the local government, bringing together an impressive mix of public and private actors.

The Brugse Poort was the first project of urban development and our analysis revealed that the design of this project was much more incremental, chaotic and based on improvisation. The project of Ledeberg was based on a rational model of policy – making, integrating a lot of partners, but more top – down directed and in a one side manner by the city administration. Due to those essential differences, the UDP of the Brugse Poort comes much closer to the basic definition of a collaborative network, based on a more horizontal partnership and with room for more autonomous private actors to develop their own strategy.

One conclusion was that both projects, developed in the same city, nevertheless showed a lot of network differences, due to (1) the different history of policy making in both cases; (2) the different strength and the organisational capacities of non – profit actors; (3) the personal characteristics of the public managers responsible for the projects; (4) the impact of organisational transformations of the bureaucracy in the city in – between both projects; and (5) the learning effects of the experiences in the Brugse Poort influencing the choices for the design of the Ledeberg - project made by the city administration.

The research revealed further that councilors played a marginal role although some of them were active in the networking: this part of the research mainly confirmed the hypothesis that the council itself approves the policy making rather than designing or framing it. The main conclusion for the goal of this paper was that the leading executive politicians are the spiders in the web. They remain mostly but not always at a distance of the operational daily work but at all crucial moments of interaction or bargaining they were the crucial key players. Without them, the network would not function and there would even not be a real and vital network. The presence of the politicians in all its meanings, is regarded as essential for the legitimacy

of the network, giving authority to the network. It matters, because the politicians consider the network as being important and they invest time and energy in the network. One extreme example: the responsible executive politician, supported by the mayor, made door – to – door visits in the neighborhood, explaining the content and the massive consequences of some investment decisions for some citizens and their properties, in the phase of preparing those decisions and while discussing them in the network. In minor and mayor conflicts the politician is essential to reach an agreement and to make it possible for the network to proceed. If there is some crucial communication, it depends on the politician whether or not this communication is effective and is seen as legitimate. In daily practice the public administrators play of course a crucial role, but it is impossible to understand their role without looking at the way the daily interactions with the politicians function. It is in fact this duo – relationship and the dynamics between politicians and public managers that forms the core and functions as the vital heart of the network. The public managers anticipate on the expectations of the politicians; they develop an intense communication with other public services and in which the managers develop their political skills in close collaboration with the politicians. The strategy in and of the network is guided by the dynamics in and by this duo – relationship.

3.3 Intermediate conclusions

It is of course impossible to compare this type of urban policy making settings with the settings in former periods. But we should be careful to conclude simply that collaborative networks are new. That executive politicians operate in closed networks with dominant private actors has been a long and well known tradition of policy making in Belgium (Dewachter 2001). Most clearly illustrated by the two cases in Ghent, we see a shift from those old networks to new types of networks: not only more actors are involved but also new actors, especially new actors of a non – profit nature and a range of bottom – up initiatives of citizens. The setting of networks as structure for decision making however as such is not new. From a democratic viewpoint, the marginal position of the city council is also as old as local politics and the council is still marginal towards the new networks. This is a persisting but not a new problem and it is not created by the new network settings. On the contrary: we could defend that the new types of networks are more democratic than the old ones. They function in a more open way, the networks are more flexible; more actors intervene and activate in a more autonomous manner the public debate.

Overlooking the five UDP's under study, we come up to some important variables for our configuration at the macro, the meso and the micro level of analysis:

1. Local policy networks deal with wicked problems. This wicked nature means in the Belgian centralized system that local government and local actors are not able to solve the problems autonomously. Due to the rather weak formal competencies and the huge dependency of resources at the Flemish regional level, local political leaders play a crucial role in the intergovernmental relations, thereby using their party political relations and affiliations. All five UDP's have been subject of important resource mobilization at the central government level and in all cases this is the core business of local politicians. Local policy networks dealing with wicked problems are part of the intergovernmental game and politicians are the most important players in that game;
2. Observing local politicians in local policy networks needs embedding the network in the institutional framework. The formal legal competencies and the resources of local

government and their politicians differ from policy domain to policy domain: variables here are the degree of centralisation or decentralisation and the institutional framework that determines the interdependency between public and private actors. The UDP's in Kortrijk and Ghent are examples of policy domains in which the local governments have own resources and legal powers (spatial planning, housing, infrastructure,...). In other policy domains, especially in that of social policy, there is much more centralization and a more balanced relationship between local governments and non – profit actors. And in some policy domains local government and local politicians are nearly absent due to the marginal position of the local level (economic policy);

3. The roles of politicians are embedded in the local political meso - structure. (a) In most cases local governments are governed by coalitions of at least two and often three or even four political parties. Those intra – partypolitical relations determine to a certain extent the room for manoeuvre of the executive politicians. (b) Local governments have different traditions regarding the roles and position of politicians in policymaking. Here the internal political culture enters the analysis. (c) Much depends on the internal organisation of local governments, the dynamics of the organisation and how the internal division of powers over politicians and public administrators is organised and evolves. This is the internal political structure. All these variables lead to a certain path dependency of local leadership, comparable to the approach that explains differences in local government attitudes and practices towards citizen participation (see Lowndes et al., 2006);
4. Politicians operate in their own micro – setting: our research shows that especially the close relationships with public administrators are part of that setting. In both cases, Kortrijk and Ghent, local political leaders in collaborative networks are supported, inspired, influenced by the strategies of their closest collaborators, the public administrators. This 'duo – relationship' and all the variations that come up in the relation between the two players, is a useful concept to understand better what politicians do in networks. Even if politicians are not physically present, they speak and talk through their public administrators representing 'their' politicians. But it is not only about representing: there is an interplay of strategic behavior between administrators and politicians;
5. At the micro – level the interaction between politicians and civil society is evenly important. More than most observers are aware of and more than they can ever study, local politicians, at least in the Flemish context, act daily in a very dense network of communication with key figures (the 'everyday makers') in and of the civil society. Local politicians with some ambitions are born networkers: they see and meet a lot of people every day; before and after meetings they spread and receive tons of information. The effects of this communication network play in a grey zone where even public administrators do not have full entries. The main effect is that politicians develop their strategies in those dense patterns of interaction with civil society outside formal meetings and formal network structures. In that daily network life, local politicians play an extremely important role and they are the spider in the web of the communication nodes, while the public administrators fulfill comparable roles, but rather in the inside world of the local administration and other public agencies;
6. Still at the micro – level, personal characteristics and individual capacities of politicians finally play an important role. The style of leadership and the ability to

adapt those styles to network features and dynamics makes differences but is at the same time the most contingent of all the variables. In the Brugse Poort in Ghent for instance the network certainly was positively influenced by the profile of the executive politician responsible for the project, open for bottom – up dialogue and debate; in Kortrijk the Buda – project would not have been realised without the inspiring but more top – down leadership style of the mayor. Both styles were effective in both cases.

In all the Kortrijk and Ghent cases, local executive politicians are essential for the functioning of the policy networks: without them, there even would not be a real network, only a formal network. They give legitimacy to the network; they organize the network and those networks are their networks, in which they develop policy – making. They need the network but more important is that the network needs them. Actors want to become active and participate more actively when and because they are asked by the politicians, because they feel that the politicians attach great importance to the network and engage themselves actively in the network.

4. General conclusions

We started the paper with a critical assessment of the meta – governance literature on the role of politicians in collaborative settings. Most literature tend to be of the normative approach, putting most accent on the democratic problem and on the functions politicians should take up to improve the democratic quality of networks. Even in the more empirical literature, a certain implicit acceptance is present and a certain hidden image of what politicians (should) do.

We feel somewhat uncomfortable with the existing body of literature. It seems as if politicians and networks are two separated realms of social life and the big question is: how to link both worlds in a new way? While instead, writing from the Belgian context, the question should rather be: how are politicians interwoven in networks and what is their impact on the policy making in those networks? Those questions and the related phenomena are not new at all, again referring to the Belgian system: politicians and political parties have always been the spiders in the web of networks, be it rather corporatist and closed networks with powerful private or non – profit organisations, closely linked to the political parties. The nature of networks is changing towards more open networks, more flexible settings of actors and more democratic networks, closer to the scrutiny of the public and with more public debate than in the networks in the former period.

The idea inspiring the paper is that we need a more configurational approach build on two levels of analysis: (1) the setting of different types of network; (2) within one type of network (policy networks), a thorough analysis of the policy – making in the network, looking at a set of variables that could help us to describe what politicians do and how they act in network settings. We tried to develop a set of five different settings that helps us to explain the important variation we can see in the position of politicians, depending on the nature of the networks. In five cases of policy networks (urban development projects) we reconstructed the policy making. One of the most important conclusions seems to be: there is no network without politicians, politicians give the network their real legitimacy, at least for and in this type of network and in the Belgian system. By their strategies of policy – making they are also making the network that becomes their network.

In the course of policy – making some key variables at the meso – level have an important impact: especially the interaction with the leading public administrators and the interactions with the civil society and citizens. The public administrators make the network work by their actions behind the scenes, in the inside world of public administration, local public services and public actors at other levels of government, while the politicians mainly focus on the outside world. Strategies coincide or conflict and public administrators play a political role, in the strategies they develop, the daily choices they make and in their daily interactions with politicians. Politicians are network brokers in the interaction with civil society. In the most successful cases it seems that those variables explain best the performance of networks.

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